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ABSTRACT

High quality instruction can be achieved in a foreign language classroom even though the class may be large by traditional standards, with as many as 60 students. Attitudes, class structure, classroom activities, and the teacher's role all play a part in this process in such classes. A positive attitude and enthusiasm on the teacher's part are essential, and they are transmitted to the students. One approach to classroom activity that has been successful uses several of the best third- or fourth-year language students as student teaching assistants, attending lectures and providing optional tutoring. They are enrolled in a field experience class, receiving credit. During the class, after a brief lecture by the teacher, the students practice the language in workshop style, in groups of two or three, while the assistants circulate. By the third month, students begin reading to each other in pairs, changing partners daily, as a warm-up. Formal instruction in grammar follows, using a combination of techniques and activities, including amusing sentences, choral drills, comparative analysis, and problem-solving. This approach benefits all parties--teacher, student assistants, and students--and is a logical way of using scarce instructional resources for effective instruction. (MSE)

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TEACHING EXTRA-LARGE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

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Traditionally, it has been assumed that foreign language (FL) classes, in order to be effective, must be small. There is a great deal of educational philosophy that supports this position, so much so that this "article of faith" can be considered to be "common knowledge." On the other hand, there exists, more so today than at anytime in the past fifty years, an economic imperative to be more effective and efficient in our teaching. The following thoughts are an attempt to show how high-quality teaching can be achieved in a FL classroom, even though the class may, by traditional standards, be very large (i.e. 40, 50 or even 60 students). In the following paragraphs, I will discuss primarily the importance, as I perceive them, of attitudes, class structure, classroom activities and the role of the teacher as they relate to a large FL class.

First, I the teacher, in order to effective, have to have a positive attitude about teaching a large class. I have to actually believe that it is in reality possible to accomplish a great deal in terms of language acquisition in a large FL class; and I want you to know that I DO believe exactly that. The credit for the success I have experienced in this area belongs, for the most part, to the students who have enthusiastically implemented the ideas I have presented. By willingly adopting these ideas, they acquire an immense amount of confidence and ability to express themselves in the target language. But unless I want to teach a large class and decide I will enjoy it, nothing happens. I cannot over-emphasize the tremendous need in a large FL class, for both students and teachers, to have a positive attitude. Without this, I remain convinced, the class will fall flat on its face. Next, I set precise, well-defined but attainable goals and I guarantee to the students that they WILL attain those goals if they will commit to them. The great majority of the students accept and reach those goals. For example, I tell them that after 15-20 hours of classroom instruction, they can expect to be able to pronounce 75% of all the words in the French dictionary without hesitation or correction. I encourage the students to visualize themselves speaking certain phrases of the target language fluently in two or three months. Finally, I point out often how far they have come after only two weeks, or six weeks, or four months. I build them up and support them as much as I can. They respond!

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I will now describe the way I run the class. I request three of the very best third or fourth year students with whom I am acquainted to serve as student teaching-assistants. These students come to the classroom lectures every day for the first half of the semester and hold optional tutoring sessions once a week outside of class. They enroll, not in the first year class, of course, but in a field work experience class, a "teaching methods practicum" for which they

receive two hours of credit. All four of us are in the classroom at the same time. I spend only 10-15 minutes per class in actual lecture. The rest of the time we are in another mode of operation, the workshop mode; in this mode, the students work in groups of 2's or 3's, actually practicing with the language. The student teaching-assistants circulate around the room, making themselves available for individual help where needed. They may also, as I explained in an article published in the May, 1975 issue of Foreign Language Annals, serve as "animateurs" to students who perceive the teacher primarily as an authoritative lecturing figure, instead of a person with whom they can really communicate in the target language. The student teaching-assistants are able to help the learning students feel they have a degree of individualized attention. They can also encourage a timid person who might feel threatened were (s)he directly under the professor's scrutiny in a one-on-one or a small group situation. There are several advantages to this mode, which I hope will become apparent as I go along. The first is that the students actively participate in class. Participation, in my opinion, is the key both to learning and to maintaining interest in FL's. I affirm that if the students seldom get the chance to speak the target language in the classroom, they will seldom speak it outside of the classroom. I realize, however, that some teachers may object to this workshop approach for a variety of reasons. Let me try to cover some possible objections, and while responding to them, outline my perception of the ideal structure of a large FL class.

First objection: "If the students spend most of their classroom time talking in groups of two, how do you keep order in the class?" Answer: You don't. The class has disappeared. We are now in a workshop, and "disorder" is seen as a positive, rather than a negative thing. Learning to handle the oral aspects of a FL involves more than logical, deductive reasoning--it also involves social interaction. One of my favorite phrases is "le français, c'est une activité sociale," and I repeat that phrase almost every day in class. I am convinced that students should have a great many opportunities to attempt to speak the target language, and that they need to be encouraged and supported in their efforts to do so. It is because my goal is to provide these opportunities that I change the classroom into a workshop. From time to time, I have to explain to the class a particular principle and when that happens, I don't hesitate to call for order, to explain the point as succinctly as possible (and it is very important to keep the explanation succinct) and then to return to the workshop mode.

Many teachers, I fear, feel a psychological need to be in total control of the class at every moment. That mentality may be appropriate in the elementary grades and even in the secondary schools, but at the university level, students do not need to have constant supervision. I am convinced that the best thing we can do is set up a learning situation and then get out of the way; our students will learn, if we allow them to, and we need to make sure that we don't hinder their learning by pontificating and taking up all the class time with our own comments.

Objection number two: "Should not the oral practice of the students be restricted to the language lab, to live labs or to sessions with the native speaker teaching-assistant? Should not the master teacher's class be a lecture class?" Answer: Somehow or other we must communicate to the students, in every class, at every level, the fact that meaningful communication in the target language is not only possible, but is the main reason for studying the language. It IS possible to communicate in the target language, even if that communication is not as sophisticated as it might be in the student's native language. We do not communicate that fundamental concept, that communication in the target language is possible, unless we the teachers constantly encourage and allow students to speak a great deal, to make errors and to hesitate in ALL classes. As long as our classroom social structure looks like a pyramid instead of a circle, we are not truly committed to the principle that FL's are learned to be spoken as well as to be read. Therefore, the distinction between the classroom where a master teacher is present, and the live lab, where he or she is not, nearly disappears. The primary goal of the course should not be to teach grammar, but rather to build confidence in the student and to provide enough structure so that the student will be able to communicate and be understood. The activities need not be divided into "grammar lecture sessions" and "oral practice sessions". Rather the grammar explanations should be made available to the students when they need them in "oral practice sessions" and opportunities for meaningful expression should be presented in the classes when the master teacher is present.

Third objection: "Are not choral drills more effective than the disorderly situation you have just described? Some students cannot concentrate if they are in an unstructured classroom. Some are not sufficiently motivated to do the drills. And worst of all, erroneous forms may be learned." This objection is really a triple objection, and I will try to respond to each in order. First, it is true, choral drills may be effective; at least they are more effective than no student participation whatsoever. The advantage of the choral drill is that students usually feel less inhibited about speaking in groups than speaking alone while the rest of the class listens. On the other hand, it is my experience that some individuals do not participate in choral drills. There may be several reasons for this. The first and most obvious one is that sometimes students CANNOT participate in traditional choral drills simply because they do not hear sufficiently well what they are supposed to say; or they may not be able to reproduce the sounds at the speed the teacher pronounces them. When either of these happens, the student may make a half-hearted effort to participate. It is unfortunate that all students cannot pronounce the choral drills at the speed they are pronounced by the teacher, or that some of the drills are not always pronounced clearly enough to be understood and imitated perfectly by all students at all times. It is true that students and teachers are sometimes capable of approaching this ideal, but it is difficult to sustain this level of performance.

There is much to be said in favor of choral drills, however. It is precisely with choral drills that we can both obtain student

participation and teach large groups of students; both of these ideals should be sought after.

There are, however, significant objections to choral drills, the most important of which is probably the "boredom factor." Most choral drills are based on the pattern drill model. Students usually find it difficult, I believe, to maintain interest for more then ten minutes in repetitive pattern drills (which is the form that most choral drills have traditionally taken). If students criticize the audio-lingual method, it is generally the pattern drill which comes under the heaviest fire. The pattern drill, by its nature, is the purest model of the behavioristic or rote-learning approach to education. Most teachers have readily seen how disinterested students become in repeating pattern drills of verb forms or adjective agreement for much more than twenty minutes at a time. Some teachers who never had a language laboratory may have attempted to teach pattern drills by pronouncing the models themselves, and quickly discovered how deadly boring the drills can be.

The previous paragraphs all SEEM to suggest that choral drills and particularly the teaching of large classes through choral drills are boring, and furthermore, educationally unsound. It is my personal opinion, however, that large classes CAN be taught through choral drills which are not based upon the behavioristic model (the rote-learning or pattern drill model) and that these can be made to be extremely interesting. I also believe that choral drills are not the only method one may use for teaching large classes.

What is an alternative to choral drills based on pattern drills? The answer is really quite simple. Short pattern drills in choral format are excellent exercises, but should not normally last more than 2 or 3 minutes, if even that long. It is important to change not only the word or words in any given drill as we do in the pattern drill, but to change the format of the drill too. Changes in activity are like little vacations. Rather than use only one activity each day, day after day after day, teachers should develop and use a carefully worked-out "bag of teaching tricks." Certain learning activities may be effective for nearly an entire class period for several weeks, but the majority of them need to be changed often; many activities are interesting for only 15 or 20 minutes and then should be changed. In addition, activities cannot remain the same all year or all semester long. There needs to be a change after approximately a month or so. This means that we may need to develop as many as eight or nine different types of learning activities if we are to keep interest at a high level throughout the year. In addition, the teacher who injects a good deal of humor into his class also keeps interest at a high level. It is true that teachers are not "officially" paid by the administration to entertain the students. But it is a wise teacher who realizes that more learning takes place when the teaching is entertaining.

I will now explain in detail one of the ways in which I conduct my first year French classes at about the third month of the school year.

I offer this approach, not as "THE" way to teach a first or second year FL class, but as one way, and a way which has worked for me for the past eight years. I must mention that the students have to be trained to perform some of the activities I want them to accomplish, but by the third month, most of them understand very well their role in the classroom. Please remember, too, that this format may be modified in months six and eight.

As soon as the student arrives in class, he marks an attendance roll. Then he sits down and reads the instructions I have written on the chalkboard BEFORE the class begins. The chairs in the classroom are not arranged in typical lecture-hall order, that is, in rows and columns, but are rather in a series of concentric semi-circles. The students are not assigned to any particular chairs; indeed, they are expected to sit in different chairs every day, and consequently, they must sit next to a new person every day. Keeping in mind that "le français, c'est une activité sociale," students are expected to break out of their shells, introduce themselves to students they do not yet know and use the target language for meaningful communication with people they have never before heard speak English.

The students arrive in class singly or in small groups. Not all of them arrive at exactly the same time. As they arrive they hand in their homework and pick up their corrected homework, which has been pre-sorted for easy location by the students. The instructions on the chalkboard tell the students to begin reading out loud, with a partner, a particular selection in the textbook, without waiting for the teacher to call the class to order. Since some students arrive earlier at the classroom than others do, some get further along in their reading than others. They read, out loud, in groups of two; they offer suggestions on each other's pronunciation, help each other with grammar or vocabulary, or raise their hands for help from the teacher or a teaching-assistant if neither one can readily solve a particular problem. This serves as a warm-up activity. With as many as thirty groups of two in the room reading out loud, there is a great deal of apparent disorder. But as a matter of fact, this activity is extremely useful to the students, and additionally, enjoyable. It allows them to use the language, for meaningful communication and/or to practice pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary drills; since only one other person, a peer, is listening to them, they feel more at ease than if the entire class and/or the teacher were listening. In addition, they have the advantage of individualized instruction because they can ask for and receive help whenever they desire. This activity is probably the single most important activity of the entire class period because in it students learn not only more about language, but also, significantly, they learn that they have the ability to use the language they are studying. In other words, it is during this "warm-up" session of each day's class that they gain that so very necessary "skill" of FL acquisition, self-confidence.

This warm-up session is in many respects comparable to the warm-up session that characterizes the beginning of a concert band or orchestra rehearsal. The members of the group arrive randomly; they

take their instruments out of the cases and begin playing. Each person "warms up" as he likes, playing scales or practicing parts of music he may be having difficulty with. The result is anything except musical and a person who is not used to this type of activity may experience a degree of culture shock. After several minutes of warm-up, the conductor calls the group to order and the rehearsal of a particular piece begins. But that does not mean that no learning has occurred before the structured rehearsal begins. No experienced member of an instrumental ensemble would ever agree to that.

Unfortunately, most foreign language classes resemble vocal ensembles rather than instrumental ensembles. The students in such ensembles arrive at the rehearsal. They get their music, but unfortunately, most of the time, instead of practicing that music while they are waiting for the rehearsal to begin, they simply talk. When the choir director arrives, no one has profited from the extra time that could have been used by the individual choir members to rehearse individually. And in many many foreign language classes, English is the language of communication between the students until the teacher calls the class to order and begins the formal instruction. What a waste. How unfortunate that we fail to take advantage of "extra time" to improve our minds and our capacities. A wise foreign language teacher can teach his students to take advantage of that "lost time" before and after class to learn an (1) immense amount of material AND, more importantly, (2) how to learn from a peer.

After approximately ten to fifteen minutes of warm-up, the formal instruction begins. I ask for the class's attention. During the period of their warm-up, I have been writing on the chalk board or distributing a handout. This material contains some sentences or expressions containing vocabulary or grammar items I want to introduce. Although I conduct the class in the target language, I use a comparative analysis approach. Rather than indicating the French equivalent for a given English grammar structure by pronouncing both the French and the English forms, I present the English structure in a WRITTEN form. Later I will ask the students to read the sentences on the board or from their handout. I usually place three or four different grammar or vocabulary items on the board in three or four different expressions. For the teacher whose arm gets tired writing on the board, I recommend handouts or the overhead projector and previously prepared plastic overhead slides. I try to make the expressions as comical and/or as reflective of current events as possible.

Before looking at the expressions on the chalkboard, the students pronounce a few short choral drills in the target language. I pronounce an expression containing the item I wish to present, and the students repeat it after me. This excercise may last only 2 or 3 minutes. I pronounce the expressions slowly and distinctly so that all the students are able to imitate me. The idea is to teach a sound or group of sounds, not to teach a grammatical concept. My goal is not intellectual comprehension on the part of the student, but rather to establish in each student's mind a sound pattern. In this respect,

this particular exercise is exactly like those used under the behavioristic learning model. But the approach differs from behaviorism in that this drill is intended merely to serve as a very short springboard to cognitive comprehension.

After I have presented the sounds of all the grammar items I wish to cover in class, I turn to the chalkboard which is covered with humorous sentences written in English containing the equivalents of the grammar items I wish to present. I ask the students to read the English sentences out loud, in chorus. Although this is not productive from the standpoint of learning the FL, it does keep the tone of the class light and interesting. The students enjoy FL study because they associate light, comical entertainment with the class. Having read the sentence, they translate parts of it which I indicate. The sentence, when translated into the foreign language, contains only one new grammatical item, that item being one of the three or four or five concepts I had drilled the students on during the 2-3 minute choral drill. I may ask for the choral translation of the sentence into the target language to be repeated two or three times, until I feel the class feels confident about it. This reinforces the students' general knowledge of previously presented concepts. More importantly, however, it allows the students to have a satisfying intellectual and cognitive experience with the target language. Having just been exposed to three or four or five new expressions less than ten minutes previously, expressions which at that time were only meaningless sounds, the students are now faced with a situation requiring a "solution;" the method of solving the "problem" has not been given, but several answers, particularly the comic ones, remain vivid in their minds. It is a simple matter to insert the most logical appearing solution into the problem area. Most students make the induction, they "guess" willingly. Very seldom do I "explain" anything in the traditional sense of that word. I usually pause and wait for signs that the students have made the "connection." Then I ask, fully expecting to get a response: "Comprenez-vous?" or "Acceptez-vous?" (I have found that "Acceptez-vous?" is sometimes even more effective than "Comprenez-vous?") I compliment them and the psychological boost the students receive from this experience increases their confidence and their enjoyment of the class. Last, and this is most important, I ask the students to perform, with a partner, two or three exercises from their textbook which touch the items just presented.

It is important to note that under this method, the teacher does not do very much talking. His job, rather, is to guide students to discover. In other words, this method uses inductive, rather than deductive logic. Now, one of the principles of the audio-lingual method was inductive logic. Unfortunately, this principle often failed because the student usually did not understand what the terms of the inductive logic process were. The student could not determine what were the significant linguistic elements he was supposed to incorporate into his expression in order to produce a given idea. There was just too much information from which to induct. Textbooks written during the 1970's used inductive logic in their grammar

explanations but failed to explain how inductive logic works (thus producing frustration in students used to deductive logic) or by placing the examples and the "problems" in an unimaginative order; one set of examples, one set of problems, one set of examples, one set of problems, etc. etc. Unimaginative teachers, not recognizing that they were supposed to USE the book rather than be dominated by the book, made no efforts to enliven grammar presentations. The result was a stultifying and unchallenging effect on students. And so in the late 1970's, we saw a return to a more deductive approach in FL teaching.

Let us not throw out inductive logic without examining what it can do for us. Nor should we throw out comparative grammar analysis, despite the fact that far too many FL classes in this country consist of nothing more than comparative grammar taught in English. Rather, let us combine both inductive logic and comparative analysis and at the same time teach by example as well as by precept, that it is actually POSSIBLE to use the target language both to communicate meaningfully and to teach more of the language. Anything less than this is less than what we are capable of doing.

Is it possible to teach a large class of 40-60 students using this combined "inductive-logic-comparative-analysis-direct-natural-method" approach? Absolutely! Please note that under this method there is no specific mention of individual recitation. Under more traditional methods, individual recitation by the student was an important consideration, and no doubt teachers who claim that large foreign language classes are impossible justify that claim on the basis that no or little learning takes place unless the student recites as an individual. Not only is this logic fallacious; it is uneconomical. Do students who recite alone really learn from their reciting experience? Or rather are they simply intimidated? Is this not really just a method which allows the teacher to frighten the student into being prepared? How many students really do respond to these intimidation techniques? What about those who sit in silence for 45 minutes, while waiting to be called upon to recite? Do they really learn from the other students? If they do, we might call this method peer-teaching. But peer-teaching as practiced by forward looking departments today removes a great deal of the "pressure" from the "peer-teacher", in comparison to that experienced under the recitation method. If, on the other hand, the silent students do not learn from their peers, they are wasting their time. The reasons for having small foreign language classes, then, especially at the first and second year, are illogical from a pedagogical point of view. In addition, in these days of rising instructional costs, it is downright wasteful and those who cling to this idea do not understand the relationship between finances and teaching.

This is not to say that large FL classes will be met with total enthusiasm by students. Students who have already been in extremely large lecture classes in other disciplines will wonder, as they come to a foreign language class, how the class will be conducted. Many of them will feel an antipathy for the large class, but the reason is not really related to whether they feel they can or cannot learn the

language in a large class. Rather, it is related to the need each of us feels to be recognized as an individual. It is true that a few students prefer the anonymity that a large class affords them, but most students perform better if they feel the teacher recognizes them by name and appreciates some individualizing characteristic. The question is, how can the teacher come to recognize the individual student and yet avoid intimidating him in a recitation situation? The answer is simple, but not universally accepted. It requires additional work on the part of the teacher. But to the dedicated teacher, the additional effort required is not only justifiable but even enjoyable, because it permits him to come to know and appreciate each student as an individual. The teacher periodically assigns to the students, in addition to their regular homework (which can be spot-checked for completeness and accuracy), a three-to-five sentence composition on an assigned or non-assigned topic. The teacher purposely asks that these compositions reflect the student's personal opinions. The teacher corrects, but not severely, the student's composition and takes special pains to write a short comment of encouragement and/or appreciation. I do this daily, and the results are most gratifying. Students do indeed feel my personal interest in them as I become better acquainted with them through this daily personal note. I look upon these student creations not as compositions to be graded but rather as letters to me, and have, as a result, come to feel something special for each individual in my large classes.

"Where there's a will, there's a way," says the old adage. "The times, they are a-changin'!" What was considered acceptable in past years needs to be re-examined. As financial pressures increase, as the opportunities to teach more people to actually speak foreign languages increase, as student expectations of excellence increase, some in the FL teaching profession might possibly need to re-evaluate goals, methods, attitudes and commitment. Many FL teachers are commited not only to communicative competence, to functionality in the target language, but also to more effective, efficient and satisfying FL acquisition; they are making their influence felt through highly visible professional journals, new textbooks, exciting research and national and international conferences on the teaching of FL languages for the sake of languages. The President's Commission on Foreign Languages, together with increasingly more powerful regional foreign language organizations, is bringing foreign language study into the mainstream of American education. Larger classes are undoubtedly going to be a reality in a few more years. Will we be ready for them? I believe that indeed we can be and that many want to be, and that we may very well will be.

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